

Pentecost 14 – 14th Aug 16

Readings: Jeremiah 1: 4-10; Psalm 71: 1-6; Hebrews 12:18-29; Luke 13: 10-17

After last week and the excursion into art I'm returning to the readings this morning and I want to focus particularly on the first reading from Jeremiah and on the Gospel reading from Luke. Both I think can lead us to reflect on God's providential love that breaks through every barrier. God is willing to give us more than we can ask or imagine.

The reading from Jeremiah is an account of his call by God. And it has many features in common with other "call" stories in the Old Testament. If you read the stories of Isaiah's call in Isaiah Chapter 6, or to a certain extent Ezekiel's call in Ezekiel Chapter 2, you'll see what I mean. And really, the call stories are addressed to all of us – we can see our own reactions in those of Jeremiah or Isaiah. But to return to Jeremiah he has a vivid experience of God and the word of the Lord comes to him. Whether it's a dream or whether he hears a voice doesn't really matter. He has this experience but in response he's hesitant, reluctant, frightened even – "I don't know what to say; I'm only a boy" - but God has different ideas. "Don't say to me I'm only a boy" God says; "I've got something for you to do and what's more I'll be with you." It's a natural human reaction from Jeremiah – one I suspect we would have. What you ask God is too big. I can't do it – I don't have the ability. There are others who are older or more experienced or more capable than I am. God however, has a different vision as we know. Now the words about being known before Jeremiah was formed in the womb and being consecrated before he was born need some comment too. They are not about predestination or some pre-birth experience, but they're poetic words about God's faithfulness and love which are eternal. God's love and providence in human life stretches back before our births and stretches out into our futures. Sure it's about divine inspiration in the here and now but there's a much broader canvas. God who was there at your birth will never abandon you, but seeks always your abundant life. The hymn "For the beauty of the earth" has this lovely line in the first verse "for the love which from our birth over and around us lies"¹ I think you get the idea. The portion of Psalm 71 this morning has the same idea in the last couple of verses.

Some might see in the story God's plan for Jeremiah. I don't like to speak of God's plan for our lives – God doesn't work like that. It always puts me in mind of the movie "Bruce Almighty" where Morgan Freeman plays the part of God and has a huge filing cabinet in which he keeps the blueprints for everyone's lives. Sure the movie is a comedy, but a lot of people think like that. I don't believe that God is some deterministic puppet master who plans out every moment of our lives. I do believe that from the very beginning God's amazing wisdom and love providentially guides us. God moves and works through everything; the good things but also the accidents, encounters, illnesses, disasters, families of origin, and so forth always seeking the best for us, always seeking to bring forth the

¹ TIS No 137

highest good for all of us - that's God's good purpose for us. God places the vision before us – “Do not be afraid little flock, for it is the Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom” we heard from Luke's Gospel² a couple of weeks ago. God leaves it up to us and others to embrace or decline his vision and purpose.

But just as we do so often, Jeremiah holds back, but God presses forward. We think small, God thinks big. We diminish ourselves, God wants us to spread our wings and fly. This applies to congregations as well as persons. What dreams do we have for our ministry as a parish that are being stifled by hesitation or reluctance or fear? What limitations do we think thwart new possibilities? Remember Elizabeth Smith's hymn “God gives us a future”³ – and we are being given a future as we await the arrival of a new spiritual leader in Steve McMahon, but remember too the lines in the same hymn “Fear and doubt and habit must not hold us back, God gives hope and insight and the strength we lack.”⁴ “Do not be afraid little flock, for it is the Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom”. God seeks the well-being and fulfillment of us as individuals and as a community of faith.

The gospel reading focuses on what one commentator terms “a religiously inconvenient healing.” It is Sabbath, the day of rest, and yet Jesus heals an infirmed woman. Jesus calls her forward, takes the initiative, and restores her to well-being. And... shock..horror he doesn't ask her whether she has faith or not. He responds to distressing circumstances and obvious human need. Rather than rejoicing in the healing of this woman, at least one religious leader is irate. Speaking for the theologically and liturgically orthodox, he criticizes Jesus for going to work on the Sabbath. But he is thinking small – in this case representing small minded religious legalism. God is thinking big. Jesus compassion for a suffering human being and his outrage at the limited sense of God evident in the complaint rings throughout the passage. Jesus responds that whenever someone is in great pain and suffering, we embody the meaning of the Sabbath when we become agents of healing, reflecting God's providential love and care. The Sabbath is made for rest, and it is also made for showing God's love through acts of care and hospitality. It's also made for individuals and communities to refresh and recharge – and in this regard I can do no better than to urge you to read Peter Catt's excellent article in the latest edition of “Focus”. It's titled “Save our Sundays”

Jesus touches the woman, releasing her from the power of disease. Exactly how she is healed doesn't really matter. The emphasis in all the healing stories is not so much on what happens – they are theological statements about who Jesus really is. Here, Jesus is living out his vocation, transcending legalism and small mindedness, to bring this woman abundant life. And that's possible for us, too. Brendan Byrne in his introduction to his

² Luke 12:32

³ TIS 687

⁴ *ibid*

commentary on St. Luke's Gospel reminds us that the whole aim of Gospel narratives is to engage us in the drama in such a way as to effectively communicate the sense of being a participant, not a spectator in what is going on. So for today "I" am the woman who has been bent over and crippled for 18 years. This isn't make believe. Behind it lies the reality for the believer that Jesus really is alive and that those whom his Spirit touches undergo an experience of transformation that is just as immediate and real for them as it was for those, like the woman in today's Gospel who saw him, heard him, and felt his touch.⁵

God's grace flows down the centuries and breaks through self-imposed barriers and barriers imposed by others. When we say "no" to God's grace in any of the ways reflected in this morning's readings from Jeremiah and Luke, God says "yes", invites us to think big, look to the future and to join Him on a holy adventure to heal ourselves and the world.

⁵ Byrne, Brendan *The Hospitality of God – A Reading of St. Luke's Gospel* St. Paul's Publications Strathfield NSW p7